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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a cultural institution's role in the Learning to Read through the Arts and Humanities elementary school program, an interdisciplinary approach to reading instruction. Cultural institutions, such as museums, provide authentic resource materials that can enhance student motivation and interest in the subject. The museum and the instructional staff can develop discussion topics that form a logical progression from museum visit to classroom performance to related reading and skill materials. (RL)

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THE ROLE OF THE CULTURAL INSTITUTION IN READING THROUGH THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES

Since the language experience approach based on first hand art experiences is integral to teaching reading through art, it follows that an art experience related to a carefully planned visit to a museum or any other cultural institution will provide authentic, direct and vivid resource material to intensify that experience.

In two elementary programs, the District 6/Clōisters Reading Through the Arts (Title I), and the District 6 Learning to Read Through the Arts Guggenheim Replication (Title IV Part C), the museum has taken a major role in motivating and enriching the art and reading foci. As a result, the art activities have been chosen and structured to dovetail with the objects and special subject matter emphasized in the museums. This has had the further side effect of requiring a closer relationship with museum personnel as sources of interesting authentic information, for teachers as well as for students.

Each art project begins with a trip which is planned cooperatively by the museum person, the art teacher, the reading teacher and the project director. They decide together on the points to be made during the visit,

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and then try to develop them in a smooth logical progression from visit to performance to related reading and skill materials. For example, on a visit to the Museum of the American Indian, the children and teachers explored how and why the Plains Indians painted leather hides. They looked carefully at painted robes, tipis, parfleches(carrying bags), dresses and shields. They examined the motifs, learned some of the symbolic meanings, found that they could "read" the history of a tribe or a person through the pictographs and "Winter Counts" recorded on the hides. They then used the motifs or invented some of their own to design a small hide painting on an odd-shaped piece of leather. They verbalized and listed the kinds of things they would have done if they with their families were living in Indian Times. Although they drew with felt pens, they learned about the natural dyes the Indians used and saw a quick demonstration of beet juice used as a dye. Four specialized words, such as "hide" and "natural", were chosen because they would, of necessity, be repeated often during the art lesson and in subsequent written material. The art learnings included designing within an unusual shape using either naturalistic or geometric motifs. They reviewed the day's activities in the class journal and in their own individual journals.

They discussed their hide paintings and saw them incorporated in a display.

This project was one in a series which included the making of totem banners in felt based on Northwest Indian totem poles; a tipi which they made and decorated and then could sit inside and read in; small figures fashioned in bakers' clay based on small Aztec sculptures; God's eyes which commemorate important events in a Cuna Indian child's life, etc.

The children learned to look forward to each trip. They expected useful information and the subsequent art experience which afforded a satisfying culmination to the learnings. They learned to feel secure in their abilities to express ideas graphically. They learned a great deal about other cultures.

To many this integrated process and plan may seem nice but unnecessary. To others it may be so logical that it needs no further rationale. However the following may explain why the museum/art workshop/reading triad arouses teacher and student enthusiasm and becomes a memorable experience.

It has been said that "the object of art is man in the active process of thought."[1] As expression, the making of the object serves to clarify one's own experiences, imaginings and thoughts. Expression is different from

communication, however if the object is expressive, it will communicate. If techniques are mastered and the object is significantly expressive, it communicates its significance, its special insights. Museum experiences set apart the differences between the "trivial, mechanical and conventional" [2] -- the ordinary and the extraordinary; these experiences emphasize the special qualities, strengths, and sensibilities which are part of the human character, and which children recognize in themselves. These qualities are rarely reinforced in the popular media and in most cognitive school learning experiences.

These expressed insights and common human qualities, when they are overtly noted, enjoyed and respected, introduce an immediacy and a poignancy, a new dimension to learning.

Steele and Victoria write, "Educational settings that encourage nurturing and a more holistic experience allow individuals to perceive openly and to internalize." [3]

One of the goals of good teachers is to broaden children's experiences, to make them aware of a rather rich and wonderful world waiting to be explored. Edmund Feldman says "Cross-cultural study, comparison of forms and styles, technical analysis, and study of themes and types -- all these are fruitful

ways of looking at and understanding works of art."[4]

They are also fruitful ways of looking at and understanding a culture. For example: In studying the structure of the Middle Ages, the children learn about the development and the way of life of the nobility, and about such practices as chivalry, tournaments and the need for identifying insignia in an illiterate society. Books were laboriously produced, and were considered very precious objects. In the workshop the children became apprentices in guilds, designing and making their own coats of arms and banners, their own treasure books with a repousse copper covers embellished with a cloisonne "jewel". They smelled herbs and baked bread. Some earned "knighthood" when they spelled 50 specialized words. They learned about communicating through symbols and comparing situations in our own culture where we also communicate through symbols. They compared the feudal system with our own democratic system.

The very best objects made by man represent his ingenuity, skill, intelligence and wisdom. They are visible records of his highest accomplishments. Understanding mankind's history and limitless variety through objects, and understanding these objects through the affirmative process of creating

analogous objects, can heighten the learning and reading experience especially where authenticity is respected and stressed. For this reason, and because teachers want to teach children to go to the primary source, it is important that they work with museum personnel and artists who are strong in their commitment and expertise. How different this view is from the image and example, constantly reinforced on television, of man's attraction to violence and waste.

Edmund Feldman writes, "Our record as human beings is better than our current reputation. That record is visible in art -- in the art our students create and the art created in all human cultures. The key to unlocking this decent part of our heritage lies in studying the evidence of our humanity in visual form".[5]

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